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New Reports on Labor Conditions in Sugar Industry in Central America

Date of publication: June 29, 2005

Source: ILRF Media Advisory

ILRF and its partners are releasing new reports on labor rights violations of sugar workers in El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Over 1500 cane cutters and sugar refinery workers were interviewed throughout these countries. The research for these reports was conducted in early 2005 and thus reflects recent and ongoing abuses of workers in the Central American sugar industry.

These new reports are being released just as a new Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is being debated by Congress. The reports present new evidence of the failures of Central American governments to effectively enforce labor protections, despite these governments' repeated promises and public statements that they would improve their domestic labor laws. ILRF initially supported NAFTA because of its labor side agreement, but withdrew that support when experience showed that it was unenforceable. ILRF believes that the CAFTA labor chapter is even weaker and less enforceable than NAFTA's.

It has been reported today that the White House appears to have struck an agreement with sugar-state Members of Congress to enable them to vote for CAFTA. However, Central American sugar workers will have no new alternatives to relieve them of the burden of the daily violations they face, as described in these reports.

The Authors: International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) with Central American labor research NGOs ASEPROLA (Costa Rica), PASE (Nicaragua), COVERCO (Guatemala) and CENTRA (El Salvador)

ILRF and ASEPROLA filed GSP petitions requesting a USTR review of labor rights obligations for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama in December 2004 and June 2005; the organizations have not yet received a response from USTR.

ILRF submitted testimony on the CAFTA labor chapter to a hearing of the House Ways and Means Committee on April 21, 2005. In that statement, ILRF argued that the CAFTA labor chapter was weaker than the existing GSP process and could not be enforced.

Highlights from the sugar reports:

GUATEMALA

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Despite the fact that the sugar industry has a policy of not hiring women and children, it was found that many women work planting cane, and some are cutters, fumigators, or helpers. Women are often not paid

minimum wage, in violation of the law.

- The survey found children aged 10-18 who worked on the sugar plantations. While children under 14 are generally not directly hired by the companies, the pay given to adults is so low that ten year olds are effectively forced to work by their families' economic situation: the lack of a living wage.
- Interviewed cutters indicated that the salary earned per month is insufficient and does not cover their basic needs. The basic needs for a family of five cost Q. 1,416.66 (US\$180) and the larger basket costs Q. 2,585.15 (US\$328).
- Most cutters work 12 hours per day and 7 days per week.
- 3/4 of interviewed workers reported workplace accidents, mostly with machetes.
- Workers who complain about low wages are blacklisted and not hired by other mills.
- There are truck accidents because of overloading.

NICARAGUA

View Report [English](#) [2]

- Subcontractors are responsible for providing 80% of the workers used by sugar companies during the pre-harvest and harvest periods.
- Subcontracted workers are often hired by individuals, rather than formally established companies, thus making the labor relationship informal, and making it impossible for the workers to unionize or approach the sugar company with complaints. These workers do not have contracts, social security benefits, job stability, or adequate safety protections. The Ministry of Labor does not adequately monitor respect for workers' rights.
- The field workers are exposed to chemicals during fumigation, UV rays, dehydration, high temperatures, and long workshifts without rests. As a result of these working conditions, the main occupational illnesses experienced by field workers include kidney deformation (creatinina), skin cancer, and sterility. Over 20% of the 609 interviewed workers suffered from one of these three conditions.
- Many communities do not have access to potable water. Studies by environmental organizations have found that many private and communal water sources near sugar plants contained high levels of chemical and toxic residues that came from the fumigated chemicals. They also found that these fumigations in sugar producing areas have caused a severe deterioration in the flora and fauna.

COSTA RICA

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- Employers do not provide sugar workers with health and sanitary facilities appropriate to the type of work they perform. Cane cutters suffer from illnesses like chistate (a painful inflammation of the urinary tract as a result of exposure to high temperatures while burning the cane) and diarrhea (as a result of eating food with dirty hands in the same area where they work).
- Discounts are made from workers salaries, ostensibly to pay into national social security system, but in fact employers those payments are only made partially or not at all.
- Subcontracted workers have contracts less than 3 months long, and therefore do not receive social security benefits, occupational health and safety insurance, unemployment compensation, vacations, and other benefits that the labor law guarantees for permanent workers.
- Migration from Nicaragua to Costa Rica has increased with the growth of the sugar industry in Costa Rica.

EL SALVADOR

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- Of the cane cutters interviewed, 31.7 percent received partial payment in food.

- 11.5 percent of the cane cutters interviewed said they relied upon help from other family members, including children, to assist with this work.
- 18.7 percent of the cane cutters interviewed said they were underage when they began working in this industry.
- 93.1 percent of the cane cutters are exposed to chemicals used for insecticides or fertilizers.

WHAT IS BEING SAID ABOUT THE NEW REPORTS: "As someone who has done extensive primary research on labor conditions in developing countries, I know the challenge of getting accurate statistics, relevant documents and revealing interviews with workers, and then putting them all into a solid analytical framework. The International Labor Rights Fund and its research partners have met this challenge superbly in the new reports on labor conditions in the Central America sugar industry. These reports weave statistical information, documentary evidence, and worker interviews to present an accurate picture of the reality of workers' rights violations in this industry and region." -- Prof. Mark Barenberg, Columbia University School of Law

"These reports reflect sound sociological research. In each case, the researchers clearly describe their methodology, their sample size and their data, and they take pains to discuss any limitations to the generalizability of their findings. Similarly, while they describe the general patterns of findings for each category of worker (distinguishing clearly between the situation of cane cutters, refinery workers and transport workers; between men and women and children; and between migrants and local citizens), each report also is attentive to variation, specifically noting exceptional cases. Their conclusions are clearly supported by the evidence, to such an extent that any trained sociologist could certainly consider the findings unassailable." - Dr. Gay Seidman, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/changing-global-trade-rules/dr-cafta/resources/10701>
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